Discussion of Decoration in Modernism

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, we discussed the role of decoration from the perspective of Modernism. Modernism has a great influence on the contemporary design. We reviewed literature for some design movements around the Industrial Revolution, then we compared Modernism with those design movements. It is thought that decoration was not rejected but there were some changes in the logic or the means of application for decoration caused by Modernism, e.g., abstractness and purposibeness. It is still possible to apply decoration to the contemporary design, but it needs to have these features.

We made three products on one concept based on this consideration. The products have abstractness and purposiveness, and are focused on the functions which decoration itself originally possesses. The products are just decoration and have no other function or feature. The functions of the products are the functions of decoration as they are, therefore, the products and their decoration are quite purposive.

1. INTRODUCTION

Before the concept of Modernism emerged, decoration was the most important element in design. It can be said that the history of design was the history of decoration. The transition and regionalism of design was almost the same as those of styles of decoration, but decoration was criticized by Modernism 1). Le Corbusier insisted that modern decorative art had no decoration 2).

We discussed whether functional beauty is the beauty without decoration and whether decoration has become unnecessary for the contemporary design. We considered the means of decoration in contemporary design by comparing Modernism with some design movements around the Industrial Revolution, then attempted to propose products on this consideration.

2. MODERNISM AND THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Due to the Industrial Revolution, the era of mechanization and mass production began. All design movements in this period were influenced by the Industrial Revolution. However, the reactions of Art Nouveau and Art Deco movements reacted to "machines" in opposite ways. Art Nouveau movement appeared as a transition to the mechanization era, mediating between people and unfamiliar "machines" by covering with decoration 3). In contrast, Art Deco movement accepted "machines". Moreover, it even regarded "machines" as the basis of its shapes 4). However, both design movements were not so different from the previous decorative styles in terms of the concept where the value of design was evaluated by its decoration, even though shapes of products influenced by those movements were somewhat novel at that time.

Although the importance of decoration declined due to the emergence of Modernism, it was not because of functionalism 5). It is considered that this change was requirements from

the International Style related to Modernism 6) and the system of mass production. Functionalism do not always deny decoration. We can find many decorations or ornaments even in the architectures of Louis Sullivan, well-known for his word "form follows function". In Functionalism, forms need purposiveness 7) and the function of products must be obvious 5).

It appears that the puristic shapes of Modernism were not the result of denial of decoration by Functionalism. However, through Modernism and Functionalism, we began to distinguish decoration from design. Therefore, nowadays, we can choose to use or not to use decoration in our design.

In Modernism, decoration was not evaluated by the property or the style. It seems that the methodology of decoration has changed. The one is the use of abstractness. It was a requirement from International Style. This feature can be found even in Postmodernism, which has a very decorative style. The other is purposiveness from Functionalism. The purposes of design are not always physical function. They are different in each case. Nevertheless, purposiveness is always required, the same is true for decoration.

3. DESIGN PROPOSAL

4.1 Concept

Decoration itself has functions, e.g. harmonizing or arranging with contexts. Decoration arranges connections between products and contexts. Although decoration is apparently a "figure", it is "ground" at the same time. Decoration is used to describe "ground" in our living space, despite being a "figure". Most products can be defined as "figures" in our living space. Furthermore, decoration specifies the characteristic of spaces. Decoration specifies the form of space, but also specifies the taste or the style of the space. This effect extends to the space as well as to objects placed in the space, even to further surroundings.
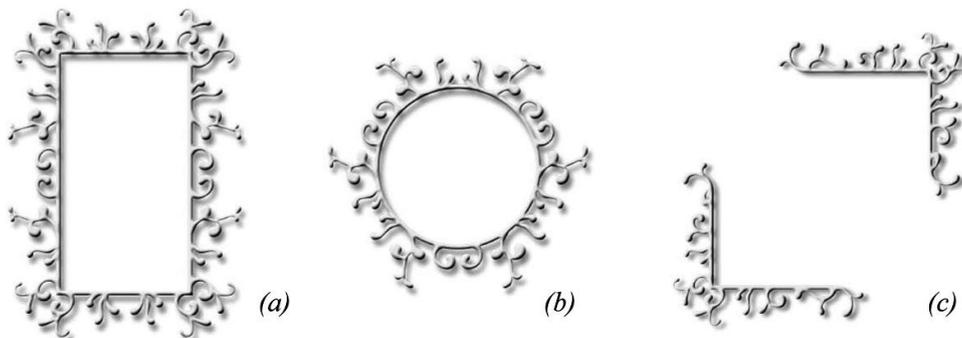

Figure 1: Design proposal, (a) Rectangular type, (b)Circle type, (c)Corner type.

We proposed three products (Figure 1) based on the concept form the previous considerations. The products or their decoration must have abstractness and purposiveness. The functions of these products are the functions of decoration as they are. That is, we formed decoration itself as products. The products do not have physical functions. They have only the effects of decoration. Thus, the purposiveness of their decoration matches those of the products.

Patterns occupy the target area and the surroundings gradually. It creates directivity to the inside and the outside more than simply dividing the space. Cognitively, although the inside of the products has almost the same space as those physical, the outside was occupied more

than the actual. The products bring some meaning to the product, the space and their relationship.

4.2 Making

The patterns were created and abstracted with reference to the Art Nouveau style. The patterns do not have to be Art Nouveau style. The patterns themselves are not the point of this design. We assume that other patterns can show similar effects.

1. Created patterns by 2D drawing application.

2. Converted the 2D patterns to 3D data with 3D modeling application. Their vertical sections were referred to the shapes of water drops on a flat surface.

3. Carved molds on chemical woods t=25 mm by the 3D data with CNC machining. The side to become the flat side of the products are exposed.

4. Injected silicon to the mold set on a horizontal stage.

5. Detach the product from the mold after 24 hours.

5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Figure 2: Usage examples.

Figure 2 shows the products actually used in some situations. The purpose of the products was not recognized in most cases only by showing the products alone without giving an explanation. Although the intention seemed to be almost understood by showing the usage examples, the function and the purpose were frequently questioned. At the same time, it was almost favorably accepted as a design. However, opinions varied as to whether it would be valuable as a product or not.

There also seemed to be a difference in the opinions for each shape. The rectangular type (Figure 1-a) was most preferred. Before the experiments, we assumed that it would be used for writing instruments, but it seemed easy to use in other cases. The rectangular type was easy to place in the living space, therefore it seems easy to assume its usages.

We thought that the usage of the circle type (Figure 1-b) was also easy to assume. It was supposed to be used in the same manner as coasters. The coasters, of course, also have a physical purpose, but we thought that there was also a purpose closer to this product, namely, indicating the location. However, of this product, such usage of this product seemed difficult in actual situations. These products are more meaningful when there is a certain amount of space around, and it has the effect of occupying more space visually than the physical ones. Because the circle type occupies more space than the rectangular type, it may have been difficult to put in the living space.

The corner type (Figure 1-c), which we thought was the most useful because the size of the space could be set freely, was the least accepted. In most cases multiple numbers are required. That caused complicated appearance. The strength and handling were worse due to that the structure is not closed. In addition, it seems more difficult to comprehend its usage compared with the two other types whose space can be recognized beforehand.

4. CONCLUSIONS

We considered that contemporary decoration needs abstractness and purposiveness, then proposed the products as its characteristic examples. The attempt's goal was achieved to a certain extent, as the product was received somewhat favorably. However, further discussion is necessary for the followings two points. First, abstractness was derived from consideration of international styles and mass production. That means the most requirement is being accepted widely. It does not have to always be simple. The most important point here is that we have a common recognition of the objects, that is, decoration. In the explanation for the experiments, comparing our products to a picture frame helped participants gain a very good understanding. This is because common recognition was formed immediately by the well-known concept of a picture frame. In this regard, referring to the well-known Art Nouveau pattern seemed to be effective. Second, we concern purposiveness, which can be considered from the opinions we received as follows. Many users stated that they do not understand what our products means, but that they felt some sort of effect. The effect seems to be the function of decoration, which we have not yet figured out. In further research, we will attempt to grasp these functions in detail.

NOTES

1) Adolf Loos, 2005, Ornament and Crime, Chuokouron Bijyutsusyuppan, Translated by Tetsuo Ito, 90-104 [in Japanese]
2) Le Corbusier, 1966, *The Decorative Art of Today*, Kajima Institute Publishing Co., Ltd., Translated by Kunio Maekawa, 101-103 [in Japanese]
3) Kiyo Habu, 1999, Ornament and Design, Showado, 61-72 [in Japanese]
4) Ibid., 73-84
5) Jocelyn de Noblet, 1992, Design le geste le compas, Tanseisha Co., Ltd., Edited by Tanseisha Corporate Communication Center, 91 [in Japanese]
6) Le Corbusier, op.cit., 48-49
7) Kiyo Habu, op.cit., 121-124

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